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Shultz, Managua and covert aid

The sudden visit to Managua last Friday by Secretary of State George Shultz may represent the beginning of the end of a shameful, self-destructive chapter in the Central America policy of the United States. If Shultz's meeting with Daniel Ortega, the leader of Nicaragua's left-wing regime, means President Reagan has decided to edge back from the brink of hostilities toward a diplomatic settlement, the shift is of great significance.

The "if" is a big one, because this image-conscious but stubborn Administration has repeatedly used public relations maneuvers as a substitute for needed policy shifts. Moreover, the White House deliberately blurred the message the moment Shultz left Managua, insisting that the mission did not represent a new initiative. If that is true, little was gained.

Although the Administration will claim that its newfound diplomatic flexibility should erase doubts about its sincerity in seeking a political settlement, some of the conditions put forth by Shultz do not suggest serious intent for detente.

It is fair to call on the Sandinistas to stop exporting revolution to El Salvador (a charge they deny and which the Administration has never proven) and to seek the ouster of Cuban advisers. It can be argued that both of these demands reflect a legitimate US interest in seeing that Nicaragua does not become a security threat.

Yet, last Oct. 20 the Sandinistas responded to the US concern with a package of relevant proposals. As an objective of negotiations, they:

proposed not to allow Nicaraguan territory to be used to threaten other states; offered to send foreign military advisers home; promised not to allow foreign military bases on their soil; and agreed in principle to inspection procedures to ensure compliance. Rather than exploring that package, the Administration stepped up the covert war, as if the offers had never been made.

Moreover, Shultz's additional conditions — chopping the size of the Nicaraguan army and fulfilling "Sandinista promises" to carry out democratic elections — exceed valid US security concerns. First, it is ludicrous to complain that the Sandinista army is too large as long as the CIA has more than 10,000 mercenaries on Nicaraguan soil, and while US troops are practicing invasion maneuvers in Honduras and off the coast.

Second, the Sandinistas correctly view Shultz's demand for democracy as interference in Nicaraguan domestic affairs. The Administration has never accepted the reality that Nicaragua is a sovereign state.

The White House is preparing an intensified pitch for \$21 million to pursue the internationally condemned covert war. The House leadership can preempt a redundant debate by making clear that if the Senate votes to revive the aid for CIA mercenaries that the House recently killed by 70 votes, the House will stand fast in conference committee, throwing the entire Central America aid package into jeopardy.

Covert aid is needed only if the Shultz trip was a sideshow to mask continued aggression. We would like to believe otherwise.